Just Do It

On Stiegler and LaBeouf in the neganthropocene

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Jonty Tiplady

1.

One way of understanding Shia LaBeouf's "Just Do It" motivational video is as a translation of Bernard Stiegler's recent work about "escaping the anthropocene." And vice versa. Reading Stiegler's essays and watching LaBeouf's video are essentially the same experience: one feels exhilarated, thrilled, excited (as if one might really do the impossible) and then a little disappointed.

Stiegler's latest essays, many translated into English by Daniel Ross, sharpen the thought of a new type of urgency and are in some ways quite simple. This thought of urgency — figured as an "alternative" — is expressed succinctly at the start of "Escaping the Anthropocene." Although the technical detail of Stiegler's alternative requires some explaining, its essence is clear: we can carry on as we are with the effective infiltration and corporatization of the senses ("hyper-proletarianization") in a process now fueled by the overdrive of hyper-capital and leading, according to Stiegler, to a kind of winding down and short-circuiting of all cognitive capacities, and to a global attention deficit disorder that makes it impossible to focus on what needs to be focused on (mental "entropy"). Alternatively, we can act now to save what is left of psychic individuation, mobilizing all our best tendencies to interrupt our vertical fall toward inertia via a reactivation of care and particularity that passes through a politicized use of the Internet ("a noetic poetics of reticulation" on the "Web We Want").

Worse or better still, the stakes of this alternative are for Stiegler "cosmic." We are talking about the survival of life not only on this planet, but also on a planet that, according to the recent rebuttal of the "Drake Factor," may in fact be more than locally unique. We are talking about the survival of life *tout court*.

The alternative, then, is simple and ultimate and translates straight into the post-art Hollywood jargon of LaBeouf: just do it, or it's all totally over forever.

If LaBeouf's speech is called and mimics "the most intense motivational speech of all time," we can now perhaps begin to understand why. LaBeouf calls on us to:

> "Do it! Just do it! Don't let your dreams be dreams. Yesterday you said tomorrow. So just do it! Make your dreams come true! Just DO it. Some people dream of success, while you're going to wake up and work hard at it. Nothing is impossible...you should get to the point where anyone else would quit and you're not going to stop there. NO! What are you waiting for?!? DO IT! JUST...DO IT! YES YOU CAN! Just do it! If you're tired of starting over, stop...giving...up."

This insistence that we just do it pertains to a certain emphatic intuitionism, a demand that we break through into the present, now, and stop delaying. Alongside its mock-cajoling and art-domain-financed qualities, the speech is also entirely serious. We can be captivated by it and find it exhilarating and hilarious at the same time. In fact, once we realize the video is a piece of performance art LaBeouf did with British artist Luke Turner and Finnish artist Nastja Säde Rönkkö, focus may shift to discuss the video in terms of the artists' ideas about meta-modernity. But to what extent is such an insistence also always a sign of something else?

The LaBeouf moment in Stiegler's paper occurs when Stiegler tells us that to all intents and purposes we actually have no choice in the alternative he helpfully outlines. The accelerations (now immediate and not just long-term) toward anthropic and entropic contraction (reducible to the same thing in his somewhat charged reading of Lévi-Strauss) that would lead toward our disappearance cannot de jure be allowed to happen. We must change direction and pull back. We must intervene on ourselves. We must just do this. Do it! Just do it! Don't let our dreams be dreams, but save the long-circuits of reading, attention, and complexity while we still can. The twist at this point is between what takes place "in fact" and what takes place "in law": "This possible dissolution *in fact* is what is not possible *in law*: *we do not have the right to just accept this and submit to it*." We must just do it.

This argument (which must be understood as a felt imperative) is developed in part as a reference to Derrida's thought of *différance* as the potential for the same acceleration that moves toward inertia to differ and defer from itself and so always never quite reaches the inertia point both Stiegler and LaBeouf seem to fear. Stiegler adopts *différance* here on the condition that it be activated ("failing which, *différance* will remain merely formal").

Derridean *différance* is at last made useful here. In its application, it is the very principle and active description of what makes the future invincibly uncertain. In its active and activated sense, *différance* seems to be the lived possibility of the nonsolubility of generative differing and deferring into "becoming" (flat entropy). Sheer insistence on the present and just doing it would risk contraction to the point of being horizonless. By contrast, the tendency to let *différance* passively take care of everything would come with a risk: that it drift into a putting off instead of a productive stretching out. The one possibility, we might say, is always already green-screened onto the other.

2.

“Escaping the Anthropocene” has received a relatively high number of hits on the Internet. This is no surprise. The title is immediately appealing and evokes some of our deepest hopes and desires, not just for escape in general, but also for escape from a situation of unique and unbearably “cosmic” entrapment (“an impasse of cosmic difficulty”).

The motivational part of Stiegler’s essay is already contained in its title. As we read, “escaping the anthropocene,” we might feel we are already doing so. In this essay, Stiegler also adds to the spate of near-synonyms and replacement terms for the anthropocene: “entropocene” is proposed to describe the entropy of our creative and connective capacities, and “neganthropocene” is the alternative in the form of developing neganthropic or counter-entropic tendencies. We must connect again, we must develop what Stiegler calls “care,” we must de-proleterianize. We must exit the entropocene and engage the neganthropocene. We must just do it.

Engaging with the neganthropocene means disengaging from the anthropocene. It involves, then, an act of disidentification. It also involves a certain type of war, a fight against those who have abandoned the fight or will not explicitly join it. Stiegler adds, “To fight against this state of fact in order to restore a state of law is to prescribe, for the digital pharmakon that makes this state of fact possible, a new state of law that recognises this pharmacological situation and that prescribes therapies and therapeutics so as to form a new age of knowledge.”

The fight here is for a new legality that has little to do (in immediate terms) with reconstituting local justices, but a lot more to do with recognizing the need for the neganthropocene as legality itself. The lack of such recognition might, on Stiegler’s terms, be infinitely more threatening than political corruption or daily tragedies and social identity complaints. Lack of explicit recognition in this case would be criminal, collaborationist, enough to make anyone not want to be famous anymore.

3.

Listening to LaBeouf and reading Stiegler, one starts to believe. Or rather, I start to believe. The exhilaration occurs in thinking there is still a solution. Reading Quintin Meillassoux on “divine inexistence” has the same quality: the fact that all laws are contingent makes sense to us not just philosophically, but also because it meets a need or even fantasy to exit the current situation of possibly irreversible auto-extinction in which we find ourselves. Watching Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* may be another example of the same. Entering the first wormhole in Nolan’s film is like reading Stiegler’s title or meditating on Meillassoux’s text: the future remains uncertain, the wormhole may take us anywhere, ultra-chaos really may mean we can intervene on the irreversible. Motivational speeches could also make a difference. Stiegler continues,

> “The Anthropocene is unsustainable: it is a massive and high-speed process of destruction operating on a planetary scale, and its current direction must be reversed.”

Everything Stiegler says here must be true. Or rather, it is already as true as what he calls “fact.” He must be right about this: everyone now seems to know or feel this in some sense, even if they don’t say so. If people say it, that is good, because it is out in the open.

If people don't say it, that is also fine and legitimate, because people sometimes need strategically to avoid thinking too much about it. The thought is there, though, whatever we do. Or rather, it is not not there, even when it is not there. We might try to be discrete or indirect about it, but it spills itself in fearing to be spilled.

Stiegler also must be right to say that the current direction "must be reversed." In saying this, he has chosen his side of the alternative. We might carry on as we are, with the increasing proletarianization of all sense and quanta up the point of no longer being able to remember what we might have wanted to reverse, but one possible outcome in that direction is not just a one-off extinction event on a planet that could then be rebooted, but something worse — a one-off extinction for all time, the disappearance of the anthropic principle forever.

In this sense, there is no alternative. But even if there is no alternative, there cannot be no alternative. Even if we somehow knew for sure that the first part of the alternative were irreversible, there would still remain differing and deferring of any acceptance of that fact, immunity to full belief in it. We have to live, therefore, as if a reversal is possible. This is the only "state of law" to which we should aspire, the only justice that counts now. Just do it.

4.

I want to change direction slightly and say something that might seem disconnected to what has preceded. In reading Stiegler, rather than ask whether he is right or whether both sides of his alternative are believable, one may question whom he is trying to convince, whom he wants to believe him, whom he needs to convince, or more generally what anyone wants a reader to believe whenever she or he writes anything at all.

This line of questioning may seem like a diversion, but pursuing it may also deepen and clarify the predicament. To what extent is writing, even on the most important issue of all time (to ape the style of LaBeouf's video), always solicitation? To what extent does every word written consist of what Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit call, following Jean Laplanche, the "enigmatic signifier"? Is Stiegler's alternative an enigmatic signifier? Is it, too, a piece of post-art performance?

Even more broadly, we may ask: whom do I want to convince in my writing and making, and of what? Who has convinced me of what? Why am I saying what I think I am saying here? Taking up either side of Stiegler's alternative, what do I want? In responding, it may be that I want to convince someone of something or to resist something in myself or from another. How might it suit me to write a title such as "Escaping the Anthropocene" or how might it suit me to say that Stiegler's whole project is in fact now impossible and so has the same hectoring and finally desperate tone as "Just Do It" sometimes does?

Bersani's latest book *Thoughts and Things* (2015) puts all of this differently, asking "is there a non-sadistic movement"? In other words, when I make a claim or take a side or even try to bridge different sides, am I still, even so, inflicting something on someone or on a futural reading space? Does Stiegler have a sadistic relationship with Lévi-Strauss, for instance, to whose apparent "nihilism" he reacts rather allergically? Is any space of disagreement a space of wasteful negative disidentification? Who is LaBeouf, for instance, trying to motivate?

Before we get carried away with the idea of "non-sadistic movement" as a consolatory thought and exit, we should also note that Bersani writes in the final chapter of his book of "a salutary reminder of invincible resistance to the invention of new relational mobility." There is a type of honesty in what Bersani says here. One may also ask about the extent to which honesty as a quality can be found in writers, compared with other qualities that sometimes come at the cost of psychic defensiveness. When Paul Valéry comments, for example, that "*La bêtise n'est pas mon forte*" [Stupidity is not my forte] what type of acuity does it take for Derrida to ask, as he did in his final seminars, "What is more *bête*?" Derrida then folds back in a number of other considerations that make it difficult for anyone (including him) to take the high ground, but his question remains.

Intelligence can be freighted and sometimes dubious. If one starts out as a philosopher, one's investment is there. If one is a playwright, everything can start to be viewed from the point of view of writing a play. Paul de Man speaks about this focus of investment in his lecture "Kant and Schiller," wherein Schiller broadly represents what de Man calls a relapsing tendency.

According to de Man, Schiller's investment was to be a playwright, and so his epistemological concerns and beliefs were guided by aesthetic considerations that precluded focusing on anything that would not be "easily represented on the stage." Schiller did not interest himself in what could not be put on the stage because he wanted to write successful plays. De Man's discourse has the quality not quite of neutrality about these concerns, but at least of describing them and making their space transparent. The opposition in this essay, also contained in the title, is between Kant and Schiller as allegorical cyphers: "Kant" here stands for a move from a tropological space of recurrent and predictable mimetic programs (what today may simply be called "memes") to the space of material inscription that intervenes on them, whereas "Schiller" names the recursive and relapsing motion whereby the latter movement is foreclosed and denied.

Part of de Man's point is that Schiller's style of relapse takes place programmatically as a kind of automated "just do it" — as an insistence on practicality, realism, and psychic defensiveness that may in fact do nothing but increase danger and lead to more ideality. De Man writes, "The important thing is that this apparent realism, the apparent practicality, this concern with the practical, will result in the total loss of contact with reality, in a total idealism." The "just do it" urgency of Stiegler's work may be "psychologically and empirically entirely reasonable," given the unique circumstances, and yet even its sophistication may foreclose the "inscription" that for de Man resides beneath whatever tropes we may project across it (including the imperatives of the anthropocene, itself just another trope, finally). The Stieglerian and LaBeoufian imperiled alternative and its urgency would be entirely Schillerian.

5.

Schillerian relapse (the opposite of just doing it) is to some degree inevitable according to de Man. There is no alternative to it. It is not simply a question of being safely airlifted to the high ground of tropelessness through the simple experience of reading de Man's lecture, for instance. The exhilaration and necessity of the Schillerian need remains and

remains viral; everyone makes their own version of LaBeouf's green-screen video on YouTube. All thinkers, writers, artists, poets, actors, or actants relapse away from their discoveries and intents and then forget they will do so again.

Describing de Man's lecture in his book *Ideology and Inscription*, Tom Cohen comments in passing that what may be missing in this scenario "is a third 'and'...which would include the Schillerized reader negotiating, from a third position, the problematics of historical foreclosure and intervention that the critical engagement of this pair opens." In other words, because the relapse is inevitable and also leads inevitably to a reinscription of the disinscription that the intervening event of inscription entails (although never in the same way: the relapse is not a reversal for de Man), one issue here is how to maintain an alternative to the simple historical oscillation of fame and philosophy (a third space) from which all this could at least be witnessed. What is the alternative to Stiegler's alternative? In what alternative response might we simply accept the *nihil* and be fine?

It is worth noting, as a tangential conclusion, that one of the keys to understanding Cohen's *Ideology and Inscription* seems to be that it does not express the shrill need or imperative of intervention, but instead raises that possibility as a question: is it possible to just do it or not? At what speed? The book tracks not the contours of a successful alternative, but the history and genealogy of the Schillerian moment of relapse and resistance as it plays itself out in cultural studies, identity politics, our ongoing "pop" moment, and right now by extension in art and anthropocene theory.

The just-do-it question is posed early: "Is the call to create new networks of cultural and mnemonic trace chains, today, merely the compulsive attempt to compensate for an increasingly inescapable fault in the referential functions of language in an information age — that is, a recuperative gesture? Or is it the labor by which a translation is being prepared into a different epistemological model, and with that, conception of agency?" The book begins by being turned toward the possibility of intervention's failure, but is still motivated by the need to grasp the shape of that failure and the forms of our resistance to it and how they make it happen.

When Cohen suggests he may put forward an alternative graphics, what he calls an "allographics," he marks this repeatedly with the sign of "almost." It will not quite be called that: first, because to do so would risk the retrenchment of a new position too quickly, and second, because we do not yet know whether the motive of intervention ("just do it") may be a compulsion to cover over a default and hidden motive. There may be no alternative but to accept Stiegler's choice, but just doing that may in the long run be precisely what leaves us with no alternative at all.

Jonty Tiplady

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